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“How low do you go?” Andy Manley in conversation

Andy Manley and Ben Fletcher-Watson

Andy Manley is a prolific theatre artist based in the UK, specialising in theatre for children. He began his career in 1991 as a founding member of Visible Fictions Theatre Company. He has created and devised a large body of work for Early Years, including *My House* (Starcatchers, 2007), *Archaeology: A Worm’s Story* (Polka Theatre / Starcatchers, 2008), *Potato Needs A Bath* (Shona Reppe, 2009) and *White* (Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, 2010). Ben Fletcher-Watson is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh.

Ben Fletcher-Watson: *How did you first become interested in theatre for Early Years?*

Andy Manley: I have always worked in young people’s theatre, but my first show for very young children was called *Baby Monkey*. I was acting in the show, but at the time it didn’t even register that it was an Early Years show. I didn’t think “Oh, we’re making a show for very small children”. So maybe I’ve never found it unusual.

I knew at the time you could create shows for three-year-olds, but if you’ve got a three-year-old coming to the show, there’s usually a sister or brother who is younger, but they’ve enjoyed the show too. So it’s a case of ‘how low do you go?’ Where’s the point where you say “Below this, you can’t make theatre for children”? People often classify their show as “zero to three”, and actually, what is that? What is Zero? Where is it?

I think a child has got more pressing demands on them at zero to two months, zero to three months, even zero to six months, where they need basic things like food and sleep. Then maybe they can explore and find out what else is out there that’s more interesting.

I made the first Starcatchers piece *Little Light* as a collaboration with Vanessa Rigg and then decided to make another show on my own, which became *My House*. I thought I’ll make it completely performative, and see what happens. Because all these buzz words were becoming popular, like ‘multi-sensory’ and ‘experiential’ and ‘participatory’, and it seemed like this was the norm for Early Years theatre. I want audiences to be actively involved, but if they’re physically involved, then the most difficult problem of participatory theatre appears: how do children actually follow something if they’re right in the midst of it? Instead, I wanted to see if very young children could be an audience. I wanted to see if they could be passive, actively passive. And they can be. They absolutely can be.

With *My House*, I also knew that as well as making the show on my own, it would also just be me on stage, so it would be useful if the stage changed around me. So each moment moves on a little bit: maybe the scenery moves, so the space is altered. I wanted the set to evolve, to go from square to rectangular, with trajectories and different shapes in a schematic way: I had been working alongside (visual artist) Rosie Gibson at the time and she had told me about schemas. I was wanting things constantly to change. I think I was worried that the audience might get really bored. It was an experiment. I thought, can they sit and watch one man basically play about with a cardboard box for 25 minutes?

BFW: *Do you think it’s possible to make theatre for children under six months?*

AM: Yes, but I think you have to be careful, because you see babies playing and they're immensely watchable, visibly enjoying themselves and you can see what they're thinking, but also you can add more to that, so you make it much more charming than the function of thought that is going on with that child.

So you can end up saying, "My four-month-old lay there and looked about and enjoyed it. I've never seen them so quiet", but I think a four-month-old will quite often do that, regardless of whether there's a show going on round them or not. Whereas from six months, a child is starting to sit up and be alert and have a choice about what they want to watch or what they want to be near and what they don't. I think you can say that they're making a choice there. They are actually engaging with something, whereas prior to that age, I'm not sure that their choice is so apparent.

I also think one of the difficulties in making theatre for children under six months is in making it a piece of performance. Sometimes it can end up with the feel of a play session and then I would ask: is it a piece of theatre?

BFW: *What's the purpose of making theatre for the very young?*

AM: For me, my reason for making a show is foremost always an artistic one. I'm an artist not an educator. I normally start with the premise: "I find this interesting. Do you find it interesting?" There has to be a commonality: "I'm a 44-year-old man and you're a four-year-old girl, but we've got something in common here, because we might find a kinship in this".

Or if it's for older children, the question might be: "I think this is a problem – what would you do? I don't know what I'd do". If I do know what I would do, I don't think I should make the show. It's disingenuous to actually pose a question if you believe you've got an answer to it.

In terms of what the children get out of it, it depends where they are developmentally. With *White*, I want them to follow the story, but I'm not bothered if they get totally unexpected things out of it. A girl once said "I loved it when the dog appeared". There's no dog in *White*. But in her world there was a dog. Now I know what 'the dog' is: it will be when Wrinkle's head comes out of the tent and Cotton's feet are sticking out of the other side. But how fantastic! How much lovelier than Wrinkle and Cotton just going in and out of a teepee at the same time, is that she had a dog! I don't believe I've got anything more to give them than they've got to give me, so when a child says "There's a dog", I think that's a gift, an absolute gift.

The idea that children have a different way of seeing the world is fantastic. Often a child is very engaged, and yet the parents are chattering away in their ear, decoding everything. It's as if they want the child to have an adult's experience of the show, whereas actually, you're limiting the child in what they're thinking. I know myself, having recently started going to the opera, it's not always the story or the singing which grab me; it's about the whole experience: watching the orchestra or the lights or observing how they're creating a moment. Why can a child not have that same expansive experience when they look at something?

BFW: *How do you know if a child is engaged?*

AM: I suppose you could say that they don't suddenly get up and wander around or find the cushion next to them more interesting. They're intrigued in what's going on. That doesn't mean to say that a child must be looking at you, because I've done shows where they might

be looking at the ground but they are listening to things. It depends what it is that captures them.

If a child is getting up and running around in the middle of a show where I don't want them to do that, then I don't think they're engaged. But I try and limit all those things.

I think the difficulty with very small children is that you don't always know how engaged they are at the time. They might seem to have been engaged, but actually it's about the recall afterwards. With *White*, the recall from children is amazing. We received a letter, five months after we'd been on tour, from a family that said "We just had to put pen to paper to thank you for bringing *White* to New York, and that Cotton and Wrinkle are part of our daily life." And I think that's an amazing achievement – to have someone write a letter unprompted to say "I just think you need to know this".

Often as an adult, you go and see a piece of theatre and when you come out, people ask whether you enjoyed it. You may have an instant response, but how do you really know you enjoyed it? I saw *Run* by Kopergeitery, and when I came out, I liked it but didn't love it; three days later, after constantly thinking about it, I realised I had loved it. Maybe you really know your response in three months' time, when you think about the piece in a different way. Lyn Gardner quotes the Coney theatre group: the show starts when you first hear about it, and ends when you stop thinking about it, and I think that's fascinating. For this age group, it's really interesting.

BFW: *There's often a debate in Early Years work between education and entertainment. There are now large commercial productions, such as In The Night Garden... Live and Teletubbies Live and Sesame Street Live. In one tour of Sesame Street Live, because of the scale of the venues it visits and the length of the tours, more children will see that show than will see every piece of work by Starcatchers, Catherine Wheels, Visible Fictions and every other subsidised Scottish company in an entire year. What are your thoughts on entertainment and commercialism in theatre for the very young?*

AM: I think the whole commercial scene is fascinating, and I don't regard 'entertaining' or 'commercial' as dirty words at all. I think at the moment, they're not highly regarded because these shows are not done very well. I think they can be formulaic, and they could push themselves more in what they do. At the core, they have got something that clearly works, and let's face it, people flock to see them, but how much more could they work?

I have no problem with a piece of theatre being entertaining or simply about something interesting. Rain on the roof is interesting, particularly when you're little and you've never discovered it before.

In terms of the education versus entertainment debate, historically England has an amazing history of creating Theatre in Education. Having said that, the model of working has been changing over the last 15 years or so. Some of this work was brilliant, but some was simply a means to explore an issue and was consequently less of an artistic endeavour. In Scotland, Theatre in Education has existed but not to the same degree as in England, and consequently ours is a model based more on children's theatre. That said, we are still aware of the educative value of our work. For example, I understand *White* has got intrinsic educational value but it wasn't my premise to make an educational show; my premise was an artistic one. It was to say: if you take a world which is pigment-free, and you put pigment into it, how does the pigment stand out?

I don't believe that the two need to be separated, because there's education intrinsically within theatre: it's about conflict, it's about resolution, it's about a truce. There's educational value, because these are the intrinsic themes at the centre of it. Theatre is about life.

BFW: *Is Early Years theatre political?*

AM: It's certainly become party-political at the moment, as politicians grasp the idea of Early Years intervention. It seems possible to get the ear of ministers in a way that would have been impossible fifteen years ago for work with very young children.

It's difficult, though, because then you end up playing the politicians at their own game and talking about the health and social benefits of the work, and then you kind of get back to those Theatre in Education problems but in a different way. It's a tricky one.

One thing I do find is that artists sometimes are not willing to say what art does. Art is one of the few things that deals with what it is to be a human being. How it is to be a part of something or to feel outside of something. What it is to feel frailty or to feel scared. What else deals with that? I think that is political. Art questions that. What else makes us realise we're not alone in the way we feel or think? It's not medicine, it's not roads, it's art that does that. If there was no money in the world, we would still have art. I find it weird that artists can shy away from that, but actually that's fundamentally what we do.

BFW: *What challenges do you find yourself confronting when you start to make theatre for Early Years?*

AM: Narrative is one challenge. Theatre for older children is almost like a different medium sometimes, because it's often so much about the words, whereas a piece of work for Early Years, if it's got language in it at all, is going to be more like a poem than a play. When I first set out to do *My House*, I wanted to create a non-narrative piece of theatre. I made bits and pieces, but quickly a sort of story evolved and so I went with the story. It is really hard as an adult to make something that's non-narrative. The adults of the audience – and they are just as much a part of the audience as the children – they need something more. They need something to hold them as well.

There's a school of thought that you must test things out with a group of young people before you take the work out. I don't very often do that. I don't find it hugely productive. I did it with a recent show for older children because I felt I didn't understand the age group very well, having not worked with them for a while. It depends if that's interesting or helpful to you, and for me, it's not always. If it is, I'll do it.

Another thought is that you should make a piece of theatre based on what young people want. I need to mull over an idea for two or three years before it comes to fruition, but if I asked a child of eight what they wanted to explore, it might just be that one child in that one room, and when you come back to them two weeks later, they might not be interested in that idea any more. They might have explored it already for themselves.

You need to trust your instincts. I heard Suzanne Osten talking at Unga Klara, saying that you might not think a child of sixteen would want to hear a sixteenth-century tale about a woman who's been locked up in a tower, but she thought there was something in it. If you ask the children if they want to watch a sixteenth-century piece in verse, they would probably

say no. But actually when they watched it, they loved it. You have to trust in what you understand of them and that you know it's interesting.

BFW: *What practical issues seem to recur when you're making theatre?*

AM: One major issue in creating work for the very young is: how do you seat people? How do you get an intimate number of people around an intimate space, with everyone having a good view, and nobody being too far away from the action, and also parents and children sat together, and it being structured enough without needing to tour with a huge seating bank? It's a real conundrum. *My House* used floor cushions and they became irritating, because some children got a cushion and just started to bang it, or found the cushion more interesting, or wanted to make a choice of cushion colour, and then decided they had made the wrong choice... Now I let the audience choose their position but I don't offer colour options. With *White*, I already knew that was an issue, so we used benches.

Then comes the issue of bringing the audience in. With *My House*, *Archaeology* and *White*, I made it clear that I would only open the doors at the very last minute and I wanted everyone to come in together. It's difficult, because venues have their own policies, but I don't want a child to sit there and get bored of the space before everyone's come in.

Similarly, I like people to come in unencumbered of bags and coats. It's not always possible, but you are giving the show the best chance for that audience to be engaged. I try and make that space special in some way. But then, people also arrive late and then the children don't settle. No wonder – you've brought them into a black room, which is probably, for a lot of children, their idea of hell.

BFW: *Lastly, what advice do you have for emerging artists wanting to make work for Early Years?*

AM: I'd say, "Well done. I think it's a good choice." I see more passion, more interest, more enthusiasm for creating work for children than I ever do in adult theatre.

Having said that, there are precious few opportunities for young artists to create shows in Scotland. Even more so in these uncertain times where it seems that artists with a proven track record will have more chance of making work.

One thing I would say is, "Don't be obsessed by making a performance that goes into a theatre". Just because you make a show for children, that doesn't mean it has to be in a traditional venue. More and more, we have to be inventive. People love the art form; they don't always love going to the theatre. If I'm going to be creating a piece, how could it be made without necessarily having to tour with lights and sound and a large crew? Could it fit in the back of a car, and could I take it to a nursery? Could I perform it in a park, and have it as a little picnic that people could come to? The great thing about children's theatre is the variety of forms it takes. But I think even more than that, we have to be really clever about how we take theatre to people.

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